

THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND CARE RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR SCHEME – EXPERIENCES OF PAEDIATRIC STAFF

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately 21% of the population of the United Kingdom is under 18 years old (1), and 40% of general practice appointments are for children (2), as well as over 10% of hospital encounters (3). Paediatric research is vital to ensure that these patients receive evidence-based care. However, only approximately 5% of National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) portfolio adopted research studies fall under the Children specialty, and publications in paediatric journals are much less likely to describe randomised controlled trials when compared to adult literature (4,5). Contributing to this is a lack of embedded research careers within paediatrics, with only 5.4% of consultants directly involved in research (6) and fewer academic paediatricians than in equivalent adult specialties (7). Paediatric trainees report that a lack of academic culture at work reduces their research involvement (8). The involvement of clinical staff in research is vital in promoting recruitment, adherence and maintenance of ethical standards, and may be facilitated by Clinical Research Training Programmes (CRTPs).

One such CRTP is the NIHR Associate Principal Investigator (Associate-PI) scheme. This is an opportunity for any healthcare professional to have a role in a research study alongside their clinical role (9). It is free, and associated with online educational resources. Associate-PIs who complete the scheme will complete a reflective checklist of activities, and be awarded with a certificate formally recognizing their training, endorsed by many of the Royal Colleges. The scheme was introduced in 2018, and as of January 2024 there have been 5185 participants; 5.36% of these were healthcare professionals caring mainly for children (10). Paediatric doctors make up 7.93% of doctors working in the NHS in 2022, suggesting that paediatric staff are under-represented (11). 98% of Associate-PI alumni report that they plan to engage in research throughout their careers, and studies with associate-PIs have been shown to recruit three times as many patients, so there is potential to impact the future of paediatric research (12,13).

The aim of this article is to describe the subjective experiences of a small group of healthcare professionals based on their involvement in the NIHR Associate-PI scheme at two NHS Trusts, to raise awareness of the scheme and highlight how CRTPs can make research more accessible.

METHODS

Experiences of the Associate-PIs were collected through written responses to non-structured interviews.

EXPERIENCES

Paediatric dietician Associate-PI – Louise, Cambridge University Hospital NHS Trust

'I found being the Associate-PI on the GASTRIC-PICU study very useful in allowing me to be involved in highly dietetic piece of research. Seeing how research is conducted, working alongside the research nurses and gaining a real understanding of their role. My role as a dietician has also enabled me to provide helpful support within this study, as much of the data collection was already part of my daily role. I managed to gain valuable experience in research, as well as support others with the relevant knowledge I could provide'

Paediatric resident doctor Associate-PIs - Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

Elias: 'The Associate-PI scheme has been a fantastic gateway into the world of research, allowing me to gain insight into ethical approval, protocol design and commencement of studies. The scheme has allowed me to gain exposure and understanding of the role of the Principal Investigator (PI) and the wider research team. I have been involved in the randomisation of patients and gaining consent as well as collecting data for screening logs, assisting the PI in the reporting of adverse events and attending all-site meetings for updates on the study. I was involved in disseminating inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure all eligible patients were randomised and presented updates at monthly research meetings.'

Anna: 'Through my involvement in the study, I felt more invested and involved in the trial, and was motivated to ensure patients were randomised. I had great support from the research team and worked closely with them throughout. The workload was manageable as I found that I usually only needed 2-3 hours of time a week to achieve the monthly checklist goals. I spent more time when needed to attend meetings and complete the online checklist; however, I was able to integrate most of the activities into my clinical duties and could otherwise use study leave for the external meetings.'

Ashan: 'The scheme provided many useful online resources, as well as the potential for acknowledgement in the primary publication. It has allowed us to appreciate first-hand the importance of research, its practicalities and effect on patient outcomes. We now have a strong foundation with which we can apply for further research roles, and the encouragement and insight into research we gained from this scheme has motivated us to pursue this.'

Staff Nurse Associate-PI – Stefania, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

'Being an Associate-PI has helped create a bridge between the nursing and research teams, giving me a better perspective in the way research is conducted. This has allowed me to troubleshoot problems more directly. I always felt valued, helped train others to randomise and collect data, and ensured patients were not missed from randomisation. I have also become more adept in obtaining consent. Since completing the scheme I have gone on to become a research champion for our unit. It is hard for

nursing staff to undertake non-clinical training, but I discussed the scheme in advance with our matron, who was very supportive in providing time on quieter shifts to complete activities’

Research Delivery Nurses - Sarah and Isabel, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

‘There have so far been three cohorts of medics and one nurse undertake the scheme on our unit. Having Associate-PIs promotes research on the unit and has made other members of the clinical team more aware of the studies and research opportunities. This has meant that the studies have been recruiting well and rarely is an eligible child missed! Having Associate-PIs means we can get direct feedback from the team on the floor for issues and work together to rectify them promptly. We think the Associate-PI scheme provides a great opportunity to integrate the clinical and research teams, and we appreciate the involvement and help with the studies.’

CHALLENGES

The scheme requires work to be completed on top of normal clinical workload, without specific funding. This will mean the support of your department is required and it may be difficult in specialties under pressure. Applicants will be required to use study leave for meetings and courses, and supporting professional activity (SPA) time for the rest, which can be particularly challenging for nurses in clinical roles where non-clinical time is limited.

Research delivery teams are also often stretched and working across many sites and studies, so it can be hard to coordinate opportunities to participate in consent and data collection. This requires good communication, proactivity and flexibility from the Associate-PI candidates.

Clinical research is often predominantly carried out in large, academic healthcare Trusts, and this can mean that opportunities to participate are not evenly distributed amongst healthcare professionals. The Associate-PI scheme represents a low cost, accessible CRTP which if utilized effectively could increase access to research training and participation throughout the healthcare system.

NEXT STEPS

CRTPs may contribute to embedding a research culture within paediatric healthcare. Table 1 describes how to apply if you are interested in participating in the scheme.

Future work might include assessing the impact within the NIHR Children specialty, as well as collecting more wide-reaching and detailed information on the experience and challenges of different staff groups in CRTPs.

HOW TO APPLY TO JOIN THE ASSOCIATE PI SCHEME

1. Find a study! By word of mouth, or by checking the list of studies registered to the scheme in your place of work (4)
2. Contact the local PI for the study and check that they are happy to supervise you – you will need an email confirming this to submit with your application
3. Apply online via the NIHR website at <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/career-development/clinical-research-courses-and-support/associate-principal-investigator-scheme/apply#apply>

Table 1 – How to apply to join the Associate-PI scheme

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